1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

tea-plantations. In this district too there has been very considerable infiltration of Nepalis, coming from their crowded and relatively infertile country; more industrious and better cultivators than the Lepchas, the Nepali are continuously displacing them everywhere.

The Lepchas also appear to be a dying race; there is a difference of about 5,000 between the 1901 and the 1931 census; but the figures for Sikkim are perhaps not altogether reliable. As a society, with its unique conglomeration of attitudes, the Lepchas are certainly disappearing, for their culture presupposes a homogeneous interlocking community, and this, as well as their almost complete suppression of competition and aggression, causes an inevitable breakdown of their culture in any mixed community. This book would have been impossible if the Maharajah of Sikkim had not made the part of his estate called Zongu into a Lepcha reserve, where he has made a law that only pure-blooded Lepchas may become landowners. It is only in Zongu and in one or two small villages outside the reserve that there is a homogeneous Lepcha society, practically undisturbed by alien influence. These survivals can be considered artificial, as without the indirect pacification of the British government and the benevolence of the Maharajah, these Lepchas would, like their fellows, have been ousted from the little and poor land which remains to them. But beyond the reservation of this piece of land for their exclusive use the society has not been interfered with, nor preserved as a museum piece; it is still, as will be seen later, in a state of constant modification; indeed the economic changes of the last thirty years are likely to be particularly far-reaching.

Of the Lepchas outside Zongu I can say very little, for I only had slight opportunities of observing them. In Sikkim they appear to subsist fairly well in the mixed communities, to a very great extent adopting the habits, culture, and even the language of their neighbours; they share with them the religion of lamaism, which is the official religion of the State. In India they constitute only a tiny minority of the population of the district; they appear to have lost almost all corporate unity; they have practically completely forgotten their own language, and it would appear that none of the children round Kalimpong at any rate can speak anything except Nepali. Lost in the overwhelming mass of alien people, the Lepchas have no social organisation; and since Lepcha life is based on the social group they have been left with little except their appearance and their gentleness which can be called specifically Lepcha. All

1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

CHAPTER TWO

THE HOMES OF THE LEPCHAS

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133 Zongu is a roughly triangular portion of very mountainous land, approximately forty miles on each side, bounded on the south-east by the river Teesta, on the north-east by the river Talung and on the third side by the mountains south of Kinchenjunga. The land is excessively precipitous; the rivers are at about 2,000 feet above sea-level and the average height of the hills is about 12,000 feet; but the peaks rise to more than double that height, Kinchenjunga at the head of the Talung valley, which dominates the western horizon, being over 28,000 feet. Except for a few artificially levelled places there is probably not a hundred square yards of flat ground in the whole district; and the tracks are too steep and too uneven for it to be possible to employ mules, let alone horses; all travelling has to be done on foot, and all goods transported by human porterage.

361 The river valleys are hot, steamy and somewhat malarious, and consequently there are no houses right on the river, though the ground is used for raising subtropical plants; there are however occasional houses about 500 feet higher up. Most of the houses and cultivated land are between 3,500 feet and 7,500 feet above sea-level, a relatively narrow band above the two rivers, though occasionally fields are made at even higher altitudes. Above the cultivated land is the forest in which wild produce is gathered, a decreasing amount of hunting done, and to which the cattle are sent up to pasture in the winter months. Above the forest level comes first the rhododendron forest, and then the snows, rarely visited except by hunters searching either for ibex and musk-deer or for the wild aconite which forms the basis of their arrow poison.

132 The climate of the Talung valley is excessively wet, even for the Himalayas; it is only in the autumn months—from the end of September to the end of November—that there is no rain.

1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

Quite A Number
291 of men still wear the Lepcha dress, though the original Lepcha head-
[177] dress—a small sugar-loaf of woven bamboo surmounted by a feather—has been almost completely abandoned in favour of the biretta-like Tibetan hat decorated with coral beads. Hats are only worn on fairly ceremonious occasions. Lamas, and a few of the richer and older laymen, wear the outer dress of the Tibetan lama —a thick red, purple or dark-blue sleeved garment, joined from the waist to below the knees, and buttoning from the waist to the throat.

[286] Until the beginning of this century Lepchas used to weave all their own cloth, but nowadays only a couple of women bother to weave; people wear instead ready-made and fairly shoddy clothes. These bought clothes have had one rather serious effect, to my mind; children are usually dressed in the adapted cast-offs of their elders, and the poor and thin material in the cold winter
[164] renders young children even more susceptible to colds and bronchial trouble and has probably increased the infantile mortality. Very few people over the age of ten were troubled by colds and coughs—it would seem as though they acquired, if they survived, some sort of immunity—but there was hardly one child who was not, and the most frequent request which was made to me was for medicine to relieve these complaints. Three young children in Lingthem or
[175] the neighbourhood died of bronchial trouble during my stay there. Adults take reasonable precautions against chills, changing their clothes and taking a hot drink as soon as possible after a wetting; children who are not with older people often neglect to do so.

● 361 There would appear to be a considerable difference in humidity
184 and temperature between the portion of Zongu which faces the Teesta and that which faces the Talung river; the former is considerably warmer, as the cultivation of sugar-cane, manioc, and other subtropical plants shows, and it would appear that the rainfall is less. The inhabitants of the Teesta side are geographically nearer the main mule-road between Tibet and India; but it does not appear and is not believed that this propinquity with the outside world has modified the character or habits of these people in any way; they are considered to be essentially similar to the people of the Talung valley and there is constant intermarriage all through the district.

On the far side of the Talung valley the ground is excessively rough and precipitous and is to a great extent not amenable to cultivation. Although geographically outside Zongu the few settlements are administratively part of it, being attached to the bigger

1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

361 184 villages on the Zongu bank. Excluding the Talung monastery, which is a couple of days' journey from most of the villages, and which, save for a guardian, is empty except during certain festivals, there are no lamaist monasteries and very few lamas on this bank.

[829] The inhabitants of this portion are considered by the people of Zongu to be uncivilised and rude, keeping much more to the habits of their forefathers. For a great deal of their food they rely on hunting and forest produce; their religion is still almost entirely that of the Mun, the lamaist propaganda having reached them very slightly. Owing to the excessively precipitous nature of the ground I never went over to this side of the river; on a few occasions however I saw some of the inhabitants.

361 621 There are in Zongu itself twenty-two settlements with distinctive names, and across the river eight more; some of these named settlements only consist of two or three houses and they are administratively and emotionally divided into twelve districts. Although it is convenient to speak of villages these settlements have no sort of geographical unity; the houses are either isolated in the fields and forests, or gathered in small groups of three or four; I never saw more than four houses which were close neighbours. Except for the three villages—Lingthem, Gyatong and Tangvoong—which possess a monastery, there is no sort of focal centre to the village, and it would be possible for a casual traveller to pass through quite a large village without being aware of its existence. Lingthem, where I lived, consisted of 33 houses; it is the biggest village on the Talung side of Zongu, and the second biggest in the reserve; the biggest of all is Gyatong, which, with its neighbour Hi, contains 60 houses. From the spur of one hill in Lingthem it is possible to see eight houses at once; I should reckon that there were quite three miles and three thousand feet between the lowest house to the east and the highest house to the west in the village.

621 When three or four houses are grouped together they are usually given a distinctive name. This grouping does not necessarily correspond to any emotional or kinship ties among near neighbours; people living in adjoining houses may be closely related, or they may be complete strangers, and full brothers may live separated by the full distance of the village.[2] The metaphysical desiderata, described later in this chapter, for the choice of a house site and

[2] For the plan of the houses of Lingthem and their inhabitants, see Appendix I, b.

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

windy days my favourite tree would bend and sway with incredible grace: it reminded me of some frail craft riding a stormy sea.

When we first arrived the hillsides were covered with yellow daphne, the bark of which is used to make paper. There were also a number of flowering apricots, orange trees, and ferns of every description, including the huge umbrella-like tree-fern, the pith of which can be made into spirit. Rather strangely, for Sikkim is famous for its flora, we found no flowers, but the undergrowth was thick with wormwood, which saturated the air with its pleasantly bitter scent.

According to the Lepcha dictionary the word Lingtem means "a mixture of slope and level: to be out of the perpendicular, to incline, to have leaning outwards." The place is all of these, except that the amount of level ground is negligible; and it was not possible to go more than a hundred yards or so in any direction without going either steeply up or down hill. The lowest and highest houses in the village were not more than a mile apart; but to go from one to the other involved a climb of well over fifteen hundred feet.

There were altogether thirty-three houses in Lingtem, and a total population of one hundred and seventy-nine souls. These thirty-three houses were spread about over several square miles of country, and in no particular spot were more than three or four grouped together. The grouping was entirely haphazard and in no way based upon relationships: a man might be at one end of the village, his brother a mile away. There was no attempt at planning; the village had just grown up like this. Additional houses would be built on any suitable site: the proximity of relations was of less importance than the selection of a spot that was free from evil influences. The monastery was situated in roughly the centre. In addition to its ordinary function as a place of worship, it served also as a village club. Twice every month there would be religious festivals, when anything up to

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

It is very important that the site of a house be selected with care, because on this depends the luck of the family: some sites, for instance, will ensure large families, others none at all. A site which has a small meadow in front and a hill behind, something like an Alp, is very good, as the hill behind may be used as a retreat. It is good if such a hill has a stream on either side; and there should also be trees all round. The site should slope gradually from back to front: it should be level on the west; and an outcrop of rocks on the east is good. It is particularly lucky if there is a waterfall directly in front. Roads leading to the site from the east and north are good; but those from west and south are bad, since devils come from these directions. There should be no trees on either side of the house, but only below. I pointed out to the Hlaribu that this last condition was almost impossible in a thickly forested place like Lingtem; but he only smiled and went on reading. If there is a large tree below, and immediately opposite the centre of the house, care must be taken that in no circumstances is it ever cut down; but a large tree similarly placed above and behind the house must always be felled. If it is too big for this it will suffice if a piece of iron, an old knife for instance, is stuck into it and left. If the earth on which the house is built is very soft this is a sure indication that the owner's wife will not live long; but it appears that a site cannot be selected with this end in view! It is bad if there are no hills between the north and east, because these give shelter from fierce winter winds. The door of a house should always face "the coming up of the sun"; but when I asked why the house adjacent to the monastery had its door facing west the Hlaribu would only say that "it does not really matter, but is better if it faces east."

It is not a good thing to build a house immediately beneath a pass; or on a site with a landslip below it. This is not for the more obvious reasons that will immediately occur to the reader, but because such spots are the favourite resting-places of devils. It is unlucky for those born in "snake" or "horse" years if there is a reddish cliff or hill

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

342 behind the house; but for those born in "chicken" or
361 "monkey" years a white cliff to the west of the site is good.
777 If, by any chance, a person of "snake" or "horse" year finds that he has inherited a house with a reddish cliff behind he
[783] need not refuse to occupy it. It will be perfectly all right if he gets a Lama to prepare nine pots of water, into each of which he must put, respectively, a few scrapings of gold, silver, turquoise, iron, and various other metals. These pots must be wrapped in red, blue, and yellow cloth, tied up with black thread, and built into a prayer-wall either by the owner of the house or someone specially deputed by him. It is considered bad to have water below the house which reflects the glare of the sun; but if this is unavoidable, then gold, silver, and copper must be thrown into the pool concerned. It is not good if water seeps up through the ground immediately below the site; but apparently of no consequence if this should happen above. Nor is it good if there is a cave between west and north, as this would undoubtedly house a *Mamu* devil. A house should never be built immediately opposite the entrance to a valley, nor opposite any sort of crack or cleft. This would be most unlucky and would cause a rift in the family occupying the house. Unless absolutely unavoidable, a site should not be selected that lies between two hills, since this would certainly cause the owner of the house to be attacked by special devils which would cause him to commit various offences against the Sikkim state!

[312] The quality of the land surrounding the site is of no importance; nor is the proximity of drinking water. It is nice to have friends and relations fairly near; but these are minor considerations and of no importance in the first instance. In a country which has some of the finest scenery in the world it appears odd to us that the view is never considered. Some houses have, indeed, an unparalleled view of the mountains; but when the sites were selected this was a matter that never even entered the builders' heads.

If a householder wishes to put up chortens or prayer-walls,

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

these should never be placed to the east of the house or the occupants will die: whenever possible they should be placed to the north. Inside the house, water must be stored on the north side; the fire-place should be on the west; and the grinding-mill should always stand on the north. I should add, however, that I hardly ever saw this arrangement carried out in any of the houses I entered, and the old Hlaribu said that it did not really matter.

Assuming that a site has been selected which does not too greatly contravene the above instructions, the Lama will visit it and make offerings to any spirits who might be disturbed by reason of the turning of the earth, or by the cutting down of trees with which to build the house. At the same time the original handful of earth, which the builder first took to the Lama, must be returned to the exact spot from which it was taken. After this the four corner-posts are set up, and the house may be completed without further disturbance. All houses, even temporary field-huts, must be built with at least two posts; and in no circumstances should a house ever be built in exact alignment with another.

As soon as the house is completed Lamas will come and perform the *Li Tashi* ceremony, which consists in offering rice and flowers; but this I never saw. In addition to the *Li Tashi* performed when the house is finished, this ceremony should be carried out, if possible, annually for the first three years. It is entirely optional whether it is done or not when a new floor is put down; but many people have the ceremony performed once every year as a matter of course. This, however, depends upon their means, since the necessary Lamas have to be paid and fed. Apart from the reading of holy books by four or five Lamas, the principal part of the ceremony consists of smearing the house pillars with a mixture of ox-blood, spirit, and butter by the Mandal. For this purpose an ox is sacrificed the day before, and its flesh offered to the gods and devils of the land on which the house stands, and to any spirits that might be dwelling in the planks

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

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[end map (A)]

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[end map (B)]

8:Nebesky-Wojkowitz--1 E-5 (1950-1953) 1953 AK5 Lepcha AK5

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/269/ New Acquisitions from Sikkim and Tibet

by René Nebesky-Wojkowitz

One of the results of my three-years of ethnographic research in the Sikkim-Tibet border region, which I concluded in February, 1953, was the establishment of collections for the Ethnographic Museum /Museum für Völkerkunde/ in Vienna. The majority of the acquired objects are household implements, articles of clothing, ceremonial paraphernalia, and weapons of the Lepchas, the original inhabitants of the Himalaya kingdom of Sikkim. The Lepcha tribe, related in race and language to the Tibetans, has in the course of the last three centuries suffered a progressive narrowing of its living area as a result of the penetration of stronger neighbors. It now numbers only 30,000 members, most of whom live in Sikkim proper. A few scattered Lepcha settlements are still to be found in the vicinity of Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and the Nepalese district of Ilam, and in two valleys of Bhutan. Because of extensive adoption of the customs of Nepalese immigrants, who today form the largest population group of Sikkim, the Lepchas have sacrificed many of their native characteristics. The establishment of this first Lepcha collection therefore was very difficult, for most of the objects formerly used by the Lepchas have been replaced in more recent times by products of Nepalese, Indian, or even European origin.

The household implements included in the collection are made for the most part of bamboo; we find among them variously shaped vessels, spoons and spatulas, a churn-staff /Butterstampfer/, baskets, a grain riddle, strainers, a scale with one balance as well as wooden dishes of varying sizes, which are used for the preparation of millet beer, the alcoholic beverage preferred by the Lepchas. The tribe's art of weaving, which today is practically extinct, is demonstrated by a hand loom containing an almost completed piece of weaving; it shows—just as a second, already completed strip of weaving does

11:Hermanns M-5 (1951)1954
AK5 Lepcha AK5

places made of five stones. The third stone in the middle is common to both and is long enough to support a kettle on each of its outer extremities. Since the stones are placed with a view to holding larger kettles little iron tripods with rings are placed between the stones so as to permit the use of little kettles. Wood is used for fuel. About 1 and ½ meter above the fire a bamboo framework shelf is suspended for holding the kitchen utensils, fuel and other articles. The fireplace stretches across the entire width of the house, as it is the chief work-room, dining-room and, at night, the dormitory. In addition to this there are other little rooms shut off by wooden partitions. Some of these have a roof made of bamboo slats. All types of belongings are stored up over this ceiling which can be approached by the help of a tree trunk notched at intervals to serve as stairs. Occasionally one finds an additional partition which serves as an altar on which sacrifices are offered. This is, very likely, a borrowing from Buddhism.

The pig sties are sometimes located under the house, sometimes at the side. Near the house are situated the stables for cattle and goats and the poultry cages, together with other store houses. The entire settlement in some cases is completely enclosed with a bamboo fence.

Individual farmhouses are as a rule all by themselves. But there are also settlements which comprise of two, three or four houses. This kind of dwelling, a kind of building on piles, is characteristic of the Rong, but has its parallels in South-East Asia and South China.

The ancient costume of the Rong consists of two coarse striped widths of cloth which are held in place over the shoulders by means of a clasp, and about the loins with the aid of a cloth girdle. It reaches up to the knees. Both men and women wear trousers which come below the knees. Sometimes the men wear a short shirt, while the women wear a bodice. This was the ancient costume and the material for this was woven by the Lepchas themselves. Today the practice of weaving has almost died out. The Lepchas purchase ready-made materials. In place of the old style the women have taken over the Tibetan style in an ever increasing degree ; the long dress without sleeves (the Tibetan

11:Hermanns M-5 (1951)1954
AK5 Lepcha AK5

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31. Lepcha house with stores

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32. Fenced Lepcha settlement

[End Plate 12]